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Enhancing the Team Experience in Service Learning Courses

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Abstract

Service learning is pervasive in higher education today, with 31 percent of students at Campus Compact member schools engaging in service activities (Campus Compact, 2009) and universities' missions and strategic planning documents increasingly aimed at developing engaged citizens. Service learning has many potential benefits for college students; among those benefits is the opportunity to develop and practice teamwork skills. The present paper describes the strategies used in a team-based service learning course to support positive team experiences for students.

Service Learning and Teamwork

Service learning is a part of the broader experiential education movement that has its underpinnings in the work of the philosopher John Dewey (Katula & Threnhauser, 1999). It is defined as:

a credit bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of service responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, p. 222).

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Studies have shown that service learning contributes to gains in students' civic engagement (Prentice, 2007) and academic performance, self-efficacy, values, and career choice (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000).

Service learning involves extensive partnership between the university and community and there is a sizable literature that deals with collaboration at this level (see, for example, Kezar, 2005; Cherry & Shefner, 2004). Service learning does not by definition include a team component for students; however, many service learning courses involve teamwork. Indeed, according to Eyler and Giles (1999), 40 percent of their survey respondents indicated that learning to work with people was one of the important lessons they took from their service learning experience.

Teamwork involves individuals working collaboratively toward a common goal. Drake, Goldsmith, and Strachan (2006) provide a useful discussion of the term teamwork and how it can be distinguished from groupwork. They propose that teamwork has behavioural, cognitive, and emotional elements: teamwork involves a group working together but also involves alliance with and commitment to the team purpose.

Teamwork requires effective communication and negotiation skills; it involves professionalism and responsibility as well as vision, focus, and discipline. Teamwork is an important component of higher education today (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003). It is a skill that is highly valued in the world of work for individuals in the helping professions and other fields as well. Relative to other areas, employers rate college graduates' preparedness in teamwork highly, which is an indication that higher education's focus on teamwork is paying off. However, there remains substantial room for improvement even in this area, as employers report that only 40 percent of students are very well prepared for teamwork (P.D. Hart Research Associates, 2008).

The literature on peer learning and cooperative learning approaches provide additional lenses with which to consider the potential merits of teamwork. Teamwork within the context of the classroom may be seen as a kind of reciprocal peer learning (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999). Students have different strengths and when working together, they can also informally teach one another. Boud et al. suggest that peer learning has numerous benefits, including the development of collaboration skills, increased opportunities for communication about the subject matter and for reflection, taking collection

responsibility for learning and thus, learning how to learn and how to operate in the real world. Another study comparing cooperative learning and large-group instruction found several benefits to a cooperative learning approach (Peterson & Miller, 2004). Specifically, students engaged in cooperative learning activities were more likely to be thinking about something on task, were more engaged in the activity, were more likely to perceive the activity they were engaged in as important, and were more likely to perceive the learning as challenging or requiring a high skill level.

Despite the importance of teamwork, faculty and students struggle with how to include team experiences in the context of academic classes, and more particularly, in the context of service learning. There are numerous challenges they face. First, students contribute different amounts of effort and produce work of varying quality. Teamwork can be fraught with problems of social loafing (Revere, Elden, & Bartsch, 2008; Tu & Lu, 2005) by students who take advantage of the group situation by doing little or no work and getting the credit for the work of their peers. On the other hand, more assertive students may take over the team and make it difficult to impossible for others to contribute meaningfully to the project (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003). Team members may feel that they are not accepted by the group and that they are being excluded.

Students may be frustrated by group grading procedures (Conway, Kember, Sivan, & Wu, 1993; Cheng & Warren, 2000; Kuisma, 1998). Such practices may cause students to question whether their individual effort is acknowledged and valued by the instructor. Students may simply be unaccustomed to group grading and may be used to a more competitive academic atmosphere (Boud et al., 1999). Today's millennial students, focused on academic achievement, may find teamwork and group grading practices particularly stressful (Williams & Falk, 2010).

Students may also find time to be a major hurdle; their schedules are often rather full with school and work commitments and they may feel they do not have the time to engage in team processes. They may be resentful of the instructor who adds this extra burden to their already complicated lives. Students may not have the skills or expertise to respectfully, tactfully, and professionally address these and other sorts of issues which may arise during the team experience. Finally, past negative experiences with teamwork such as those noted above may negatively impact students' attitudes going into a new team situation.

In their study of undergraduates' group work experiences, Bourner, Hughes, and Bourner (2001) found that students viewed group work as beneficial to them in many ways; however, they disliked some of the more challenging interpersonal aspects of it such as negotiating with group members and working with unmotivated people. To a lesser extent, they disliked the unequal division of work, the time constraints that they faced, and relying upon one another.

These challenges may be viewed as an illustration of why a focus on teamwork is needed. Students need to learn how to communicate effectively, to deal with conflict constructively, and to monitor and assess their interpersonal skills. However, faculty face the challenges of supporting students in developing these skills, providing students with a positive team and class experience, and conveying other critical course content. Faculty must also make decisions about assessment of teamwork, such as whether to assign individual or group grades and whether to grade the group process, the group product, or a combination of the two (Boud et al., 1999).

Predictors of positive attitudes about teamwork among students identified in the literature include the provision of class time to work on team projects, students' perceptions that they have received good grades on team projects, a perception that the amount of work required by the team is reasonable and appropriate, and that they did not encounter "free riders" or social loafers in their team experience (Pfaff & Huddleston, 2003). Bacon, Stewart, and Silver's (1999) research on teamwork with MBA students led to several recommendations, including: providing teams with clear instructions and grading criteria; maximizing time students spend in teams, ideally lasting throughout the semester; allowing students to have a say in group assignments; letting group size be determined by pedagogical objectives; and enhancing team training. The research of Pfaff and Huddleston and Bacon, Stewart, and Silver and others (Boud et al., 1999; Kuisma, 1998) supports the use of peer evaluation in combination with self-assessment.

Given the challenges of teamwork, why focus on teamwork in the context of service learning, which also has its own set of inherent challenges? Service learning courses can benefit from a team approach because service learning is intended to address real-world problems and real-world problems demand the attention of teams. Indeed, Maglaughlin and Sonnenwald (2005), whose focus is interdisciplinary research collaboration in the natural sciences, note that complex

problems require collaboration. Gronski and Pigg (2000), whose interest is human services education, propose that universities need to do a better job of using experiential learning to advance students' collaborative skills. Service learning courses can provide a safe space for students to practice their teamwork and collaborative skills.

Collaboration among faculty, students, and community partners is a necessary component of service learning. Peacock, Bradley, and Shenk (2001) discuss the importance of building strong collaborations between community and higher education partners as the foundation for effective service learning partnerships. Service learning, like co-teaching, can provide faculty with the opportunity for faculty to model collaborative practices for their students.

While there is a sizable literature on teamwork and a growing literature on service learning, there is limited literature on teamwork in the context of service learning. Vaughn (2010) who used service learning as part of her small group communication course, found it to be a useful method in developing students' appreciation for teamwork. She notes that because students were highly motivated by their service learning projects, they were more cooperative and more willing to do their fair share of work. Vaughn proposes that service learning lends itself to a team orientation and can help students to have more positive attitudes about teamwork generally. Williams and Falk (2010) used data from graduating seniors' exit interview surveys to identify the benefits and challenges of a team-based service learning course. While more students identified the group aspect of their work as positive, students also identified the challenges of working as a team. Building upon the work of Vaughn (2010) and Williams and Falk (2010), this paper suggests that there is value in using teams in a service learning course, and that there is value added in providing explicit opportunities to learn about and reflect upon teamwork in this context. The paper is intended to help address the apparent gap in the literature by describing strategies to enhance the team experience in a service learning course.

The Course

Community Services for Families is an undergraduate course in the Department of Family Studies and Community Development at a large, public, metropolitan university. The course is required for Family Studies majors and is typically taken during the semester prior to students' first internship experience. As part of the course, students are required to complete service learning projects in teams of 3 to 5 students in local community organizations. Although

sometimes there are multiple teams at one site, each team has its own clearly defined project. It is expected that each student will contribute approximately 50 hours of time to these projects, which includes time spent onsite and offsite and involves planning, implementation, and evaluation of their projects.

Service learning projects for this class have included activities such as developing outreach and marketing materials, planning and implementing events, conducting client satisfaction surveys, and compiling data on the prevalence or incidence of relevant issues. Sites have included, for example, public schools, and nonprofit organizations with missions focused on issues such as adoption, disabilities, child abuse, and youth service.

Course content focuses on project development, including needs assessment, planning, and evaluation. Additionally, the course focuses on service learning and community development skills, including self-assessment, reflection, teamwork, leadership, communication and conflict resolution, and developing community partnerships.

On the first day of class, students complete a form which provides the instructor with some basic information about students' interests, backgrounds, and previous team experience, as well as students' schedules and access to transportation. This information is then used to assign students to teams. Assignment typically takes place in the first or second week of class. This strategies described below were used to enhance the team experience with two sections of the course in the fall of 2009.

Time for Teamwork

During the period under examination in this paper, the course met twice weekly for 1.25 hours each session. During these times, there was usually a formal class session and time was sometimes allotted for groups to meet as part of the formal class. Other times, there was no formal class held and instead, students were given the time to meet as teams, to meet with the instructor, or to actively pursue their service learning initiatives.

Teams were encouraged to meet face-to-face with one another frequently over the course of the semester. They were also required to do so several times over the course of the semester. For each required meeting, teams prepared meeting minutes which were subsequently submitted to the instructor. Sometimes, specific assignments were given to be completed at these group

meetings; other times, it was up to the student groups to use the time as they saw fit, such as for project planning and monitoring or for team processing.

Additionally, each team was required to meet with the instructor three times over the course of the semester. These meetings were held at the beginning of the semester, in the middle of the semester, and at the end of the semester. These meetings were typically about 25 minutes long and gave student groups the opportunity to ask questions, share concerns about their service projects or service sites, and problem solve with the guidance and support of the instructor. They also gave the instructor an opportunity to provide more specific guidance to individual teams than can be done during regular class. The meeting at the beginning of the semester focused on the service learning plan and the meeting in the middle of the semester served as a check-in, monitoring session. The meeting at the end of the semester served as an informal exit interview in which students were asked to provide feedback about their sites and site supervisors, projects, team experiences, and reflections on course structure, content, and assignments. Additional team meetings with the instructor were held as needed.

Learning about Teamwork

As part of the course, students completed readings and exercises about leadership, teamwork, communication, and conflict resolution drawn primarily from their textbook (Cress, Collier, Reitenauer, & Associates, 2005). Students learned about the stages of group development (Tuckman, 2001) and applied the stage model to their service learning team. Students learned about dealing with conflict constructively and destructively and utilized role play scenarios in class. Some of these scenarios dealt with conflict among team members such as a team member who is always late or absent for team meetings; others dealt with conflict between the team and the site, such as confronting a site supervisor who is constantly having team members do work outside the parameters of the primary service project.

Reflecting on Teamwork

Students were asked to reflect on their team experiences multiple times and in several ways throughout the semester, beginning with the information sheet that they completed on the first day of class. One item on this form asked students to describe their experiences working on a team, what roles they typically take in teams, and what assets they bring to team experiences. As part of their service learning action plan, each student was required to develop at

least one professional goal. The goal had to relate back to some aspect of the course; thus, many students' goals were tied to the development of their leadership, teamwork, communication, and conflict resolution skills. In the group's final evaluation report and presentation to the class, students were required to report back on their progress in achieving these goals and to state their plans for continued growth in these areas.

Students were also required to keep reflective field notes for this course. Oftentimes, the field notes were used to discuss strengths and challenges students faced working with their teams. Notes were collected and reviewed by the instructor twice over the course of the semester, once in the middle of the semester and once at the end.

Two team presentations to the class were required. While the final presentation had specific expectations and requirements, the mid-semester presentation was more open, allowing student teams the opportunity to present whatever they felt was most important about their service learning experience to date or areas where they wanted constructive feedback from the class. Mid-semester presentations counted toward students' participation but were not assigned a specific letter or number grade. These mid-semester presentations provided a unique opportunity for student groups to not only become more cohesive as groups but also to get to know and support other groups. Students learned about other teams' service activities, strategized together, and supported one another.

Assessing Teamwork

Peer evaluation forms provided students with opportunities to give feedback on the quantity and quality of work completed by themselves and their teammates. For each of three major group assignments, the action plan, the evaluation report, and the final presentation, and for the overall service learning experience, students were asked to state which percentage of work was completed by each student in the team, including themselves. They were also asked to rate on a Likert scale from 1 to 4 (never, some of the time, most of the time, all of the time), how much each team member committed to doing work, did their share of the work, produced quality work, and actively participated in the team. This scale is based on Levi and Cadiz's (1998) teamwork evaluation form; the only change is that they used a scale from 1 to 5 for each item.

Peer evaluations were used for class purposes to adjust students' grades on group assignments up or down based on the quantity and quality of effort put forth. For each of the three major group assignments, the instructor assigned a grade to the product and then adjusted each team member's grade for the assignment based on peers' evaluations of their contribution to the product. The possible outcomes were for each team member's grade to be unaffected; for the whole team to earn five bonus points for exceptional teamwork; for one or more members of the team to earn five bonus points; or for one or more members of the team to have their grade reduced by five or ten points or to earn a grade of 0 for the assignment.

Student Perceptions of Team Experiences

Comments on a feedback form that students completed at the end of the semester were used to analyze students' perceptions of the class and their overall team experience. Specifically, students were asked to describe how this class compared with other college classes they had taken and they were also asked to identify strengths of this class. Some students used these questions to focus on the team component of the course. Illustrative comments include, "The strengths include working successfully in teams," "The students really worked together in my group," and "I've enjoyed the experience in this class. I learned a lot about service learning, and me and my group worked very well together." Other strengths noted include, "having to collaborate with your group members on all of the assignments" and "it teaches teamwork skills."

On the feedback forms, students were also asked to share their thoughts on how their teams worked effectively together and in what ways their teams could have functioned more effectively. The main ways that students believed that their teams functioned effectively were in the areas of communication, respect/trust, equal participation, flexibility/adaptability, and camaraderie. Areas noted for improvement included communication, time, and equal participation.

The most common theme that emerged as *a strength* of the teams was communication. Representative comments include, "Good communication. No fighting. Listening to others' opinions"; "We answer each other's questions/communicate." Some students mentioned respect or trust as ways that their teams functioned effectively. For example, one student wrote, "We trusted one another, we could lean on each other." Another wrote, "We all relied on each other and came through for each other." Several students wrote about

equal participation by all group members and many used the specific phrasing, “no social loafing.” Social loafing was a topic discussed in class and clearly internalized by the students. Several students wrote about the group’s capacity for flexibility or adaptability. Representative comments include, “We function effectively because we were able to get along and adapt to change”; and “we tried to be easygoing and ‘go with the flow.’” Several students also mentioned a sense of camaraderie. This was expressed with comments about friendship and inclusion. Examples of such comments include “We handled stressful situations well and ended up becoming friends” and “We love each other and give group hugs.”

The main themes that arose from the question about ways that the groups could *function more effectively* were communication, time, and equal participation. Communication was a central theme for improvement, although it came up more frequently as a strength. One student suggested that an area for improvement would be for his teammates to have been “...less hostile towards each other when conflicts arose.” Another student proposed, “We could have learned to communicate more and better.” Several students mentioned time as an area for improvement, including amount of time spent together as a group onsite or meeting. For example, one student wrote, “I would have enjoyed this a little more if my group was able to go together to our site.” Equal participation also came up as an area for improvement. One student noted, “We could work better at dividing up the responsibilities and making sure that everyone is participating 100%!”

Discussion

In general, students were satisfied with their team experiences and the effort expended by team members. It appears that students successfully internalized teamwork knowledge and skills. They were able to use appropriate language to communicate about teamwork, including terms such as “active listening,” “social loafing,” “team cohesion, and “mutual respect.” Furthermore, students generally did not point fingers at one another but seemed to appreciate that it was the responsibility of the whole group to ensure the group’s success. For example, one student commented on her feedback form, “One team member missed a lot of important meetings. I think as a group we all should have addressed this issue so she knew how we all were feeling.”

The peer evaluation forms appear to have been effective in relieving student concerns about group grades. One student noted on her evaluation

form, “[Having] group evaluation forms makes the group work fair.” Peer evaluation provided important information to the instructor that could be followed up on with students, and the impact of peer evaluation on student grades provided a key message to students that social loafing was unacceptable and would have consequences.

In both class sections, there seemed to be a strong sense of community among the class as a whole. For example, on the feedback form, one student wrote, “The strength of the course is the class as a support system in helping others” and another student noted that a strength of the course is, “making sure everyone feels comfortable.” In response to the question about how the course differs from other college courses, one student noted, “The biggest difference is I feel like I really got to know my classmates and the professor.” Summers, Beretvas, Svinicki, and Gorin (2005) found that group work is a positive predictor of undergraduate students’ feelings of classroom community. McKinney, McKinney, Franiuk, and Schweitzer’s (2006) research on college students’ sense of community in the classroom suggests that students’ sense of community can be increased using simple classroom practices; that students’ enjoyment of a class and perception of how much they have learned are correlated with one another; and that students’ sense of classroom community also correlates with students’ actual performance in the class. The areas focused on in their study were connection, participation, safety, support, belonging, and empowerment.

All of these are areas that relate directly to the team service learning experience. Students know one another because they are working in teams and hearing about each team’s accomplishments and challenges over the course of the semester through class presentations. This also contributed to a sense of safety and belonging in the classroom. Students were actively participating in class through their service experiences. They supported each other, both members of the team and the class as a whole, by venting, sharing ideas, problem solving together, and encouraging one another. Students were empowered through their service learning activities and by being active participants in the classroom through presentations, role plays, and peer evaluations.

One might wonder whether an explicit focus on teamwork is necessary in the context of service learning. Within the context of this course, an explicit focus on teamwork appeared to be helpful in providing students with the language to talk about teamwork and related issues, such as social loafing, stages of group

development, and conflict resolution in more rational and less emotional ways. Giving students multiple opportunities to reflect on their growth as teams and as teammates seemed to help students recognize and celebrate their development of teamwork skills over the course of the semester. Finally, allowing students to express concerns about equity and quality issues with respect to team projects through peer assessments seemed to alleviate student frustrations and anxiety from the beginning of the semester. Thus, it is the sense of this author that an explicit focus on teamwork in the context of service learning, while perhaps not necessary, can exponentially enhance student learning with respect to teamwork as well as overall satisfaction with the service learning experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, service learning appears to be a promising vehicle for teaching and learning the attitudes and skills required for effective teamwork. However, to help ensure positive service learning team experiences, much care and thought is required on the part of the instructor. Strategies used successfully in the service learning course described in this paper include providing class time for teamwork, providing course content on teamwork, offering multiple opportunities for reflection throughout the semester, and including peer and self assessment of team activities in the evaluation process. Further research is required to maximize the benefits of service learning with respect to teamwork knowledge and skills.

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